

SIGNIFICANCE OF YORKTOWN

Yorktown is a site not only of national significance but also of worldwide prominence for its associations with the cause of freedom. This small community is significant in American military and political history, commerce and trade, and architecture. In addition, the village retains much of its eighteenth-century character. Yorktown's historical and architectural significance, as well as its important archaeological resources, have qualified the village for listing as an historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.

Architecture

Based upon National Register criterion C, Yorktown's architecture has national significance in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture as follows: (1) it embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, namely its fine examples of Georgian architecture, seventeenth-and eighteenth-century brick and frame residences, and marl construction; and (2) the archaeological remains of other buildings important to the history of the village.

Yorktown retains a large number of its eighteenth-century buildings and features, giving the village the appearance of an earlier time that contrasts with the twentieth-century commercial development along nearby U.S. Route 17. Most of the village's original lot lines – those laid out on the bluffs in 1691 – are extant. Main Street still dominates the street network in the upper portion of the village, and all of Major Lawrence Smith's seven original cross streets still remain. Three currently connect to Water Street, the major thoroughfare of the waterfront area. An eighth street, Comte de Grasse Street, was added after the Revolution and provides an additional connection to the waterfront.

Residences, dating from the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, form a significant number of the village's architectural resources. Several fine examples ranging from modest to grand give insight into the domestic life of Yorktown's mercantile and political residents. The Sessions House (lot 56) dating from 1692 is one of the best examples of a seventeenth-century brick residence in York County, if not Virginia, and the earliest in Yorktown. The five-bay Flemish-bond structure features a clipped gable roof and two T-shaped exterior end chimneys. The Thomas Pate house (lot 42), built shortly after 1700 by York ferryman and ordinary keeper Pate, later was owned by Cole Digges and his children. The four-bay, Flemish-bond brick house was extensively remodeled in 1925. The Somerwell House (lot 36), built by Mungo Somerwell, a local ferryman was later part of the holdings of the Lightfoot family. Dating to before 1707, the restored three-bay Flemish-bond brick residence served as a hospital during the Civil War. The Ballard House (lot 54), built by Captain John Ballard in 1744, is a five-bay frame structure with beaded clapboards. Adjacent to it is the Edmund Smith House (lot 53), five-bay Flemish-bond brick structure built in 1751 and restored in 1976. Fronting on Nelson Street, the building was altered early in this century and its entrance reoriented for a time to serve as the guesthouse for the adjacent Nelson House, then known as the York Hall estate.

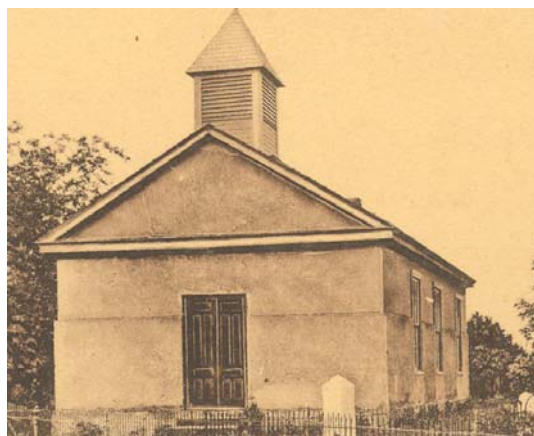


Nelson House



Dudley Digges House

Two Yorktown residences are of particular note. The Nelson House (lot 52) is perhaps the most elaborate residence in the village and one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in Virginia. Built about 1730 by Thomas “Scotch Tom” Nelson, the house remained in the Nelson family until 1914 when it was purchased as the nucleus of the York Hall estate. During his 1824-25 tour of America, Lafayette stayed at the Nelson house while revisiting the site of Cornwallis’s defeat and surrender to American and French forces. The two-story, five-bay, Flemish-bond brick structure has stone quoins, sills, lintels and keystones, a central doorway with gauged and rubbed brick piers, a pedimented, side-gabled roof with a generous dentil cornice, and two interior chimneys. Smaller and simpler – but no less significant – is the Dudley Digges House (lot 77), an outstanding example of a mid-eighteenth-century one-and-a-half-story house in Virginia and one of the few surviving wood-frame houses in Yorktown. Built about 1755, the five-bay structure features five gabled dormers that pierce the north and south slopes of the roof. Four frame outbuildings are contemporary with the house.

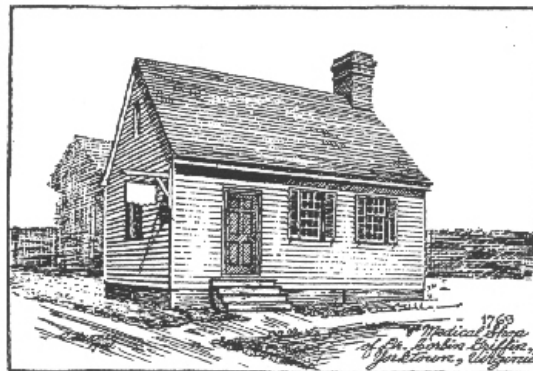


Grace Church

Several non-residential structures are important architectural resources in Yorktown. Grace Church (lot 35), dating to about 1697, is one of Yorktown’s few surviving colonial structures built of marl. A naturally occurring, limestone-like substance formed by the combination of clay and shells on the ocean floor, marl was used for the foundation of many early buildings but less frequently for their general construction. The church was gutted by fire in 1814 and the main portion restored in 1848, at which time the exterior walls may have received their present stucco coating. The two-story, brick Custom

House (lot 43) with its steeply pitched hipped roof was built in 1706 by Richard Ambler, the custom collector. Due to Yorktown's importance in the tobacco trade, the Custom House may well have been the best known public building of its day in Virginia after the Capitol and Governor's Palace in Williamsburg.¹

War and natural disaster have taken their toll on Yorktown's historic architecture, including two Nelson family residences. American shelling in 1781 destroyed the brick residence of Secretary Thomas Nelson, one of the earliest-known losses. A large, H-shaped house on lots 46, 47, 84 and 85 belonging to Thomas's brother, William Nelson, was destroyed by fire in 1814, although its buried foundations are extant. The Medical Shop (lot 30), built about 1769, also was a casualty of the same 1814 fire, which started in the adjacent Lawrence Gibbons house and swept through much of Yorktown. The Medical Shop, reconstructed by the National Park Service in 1936, was probably similar to other such buildings throughout the colonies at that time. The Archer cottage (lot 107), built by Thomas Archer in the early eighteenth century on the Yorktown waterfront, also was destroyed in the 1814 fire and was reconstructed shortly thereafter on the original foundations. The Swan Tavern (lot 25), built in 1722, no doubt was one of the most popular buildings in the village, enjoying much patronage from the Court House (lot 24, the third of five courthouses on its site) across the street. The tavern was destroyed by fire when ammunition stored in the Court House by Union troops exploded in December 1863. The National Park Service reconstructed the Swan Tavern in 1930.



Medical Shop

Yorktown has continued to attract those seeking an exceptional quality of life. In the twentieth century, several important residences have taken their places alongside the homes of earlier periods, and have achieved significance in their own right. The Flemish-bond brick Hornsby House (lot 64), built in 1933 in the Georgian Revival style, has a prominent location on Main Street. Its materials, massing and high level of detail, as well as its gardens and outbuildings, make it compatible with historic structures such as the Nelson House.

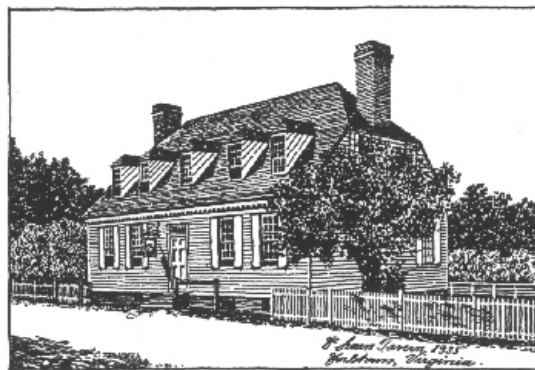
Perhaps the most significant development of the twentieth century in Yorktown is the strong presence of the National Park Service, and its stewardship not only of many of Yorktown's historic homes and buildings, but also of the adjacent battlefields, fortifications and other historic sites. The National Park Service's interest and involvement in Yorktown dates to the 1930s – contemporary with early restoration and reconstruction efforts in Williamsburg – and resulted in the purchase of much of the

¹ Trudell, Clyde F. *Colonial Yorktown*, p. 91.

village and surrounding landscape. Since that time the Park Service has emphasized restoration and re-use of structures wherever possible, supplementing the available resources with effective interpretation.

THE DESIGN GUIDELINES

These Design Guidelines have been developed to help protect the historic character of the village of Yorktown within the area designated by the York County Zoning Ordinance as the Yorktown Historic District. The Guidelines provide design standards for activities involving renovation and modification of existing resources and new construction. They have been developed with appropriate consideration of *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, the most widely used preservation standards and guidelines in the United States.



Swan Tavern

The standards contained in the Yorktown Design Guidelines address five types of activities within the Village:

- Site planning, whether associated with existing or new development;
- Architectural additions and alterations to existing structures;
- Relocation and demolition of existing structures;
- New construction; and
- Design and placement of signs

Property owners seeking to obtain a building permit for alterations to existing buildings or for new construction must first obtain a certificate of appropriateness from the Historic Yorktown Design Committee (HYDC), as appointed by the York County Board of Supervisors. Before granting a certificate the HYDC reviews projects to determine the appropriateness of proposed actions and compliance with the Design Guidelines. The Guidelines also assist property owners in planning alterations and new construction. Compatibility with the historic character is the most important consideration in evaluating appropriateness.

The Yorktown Historic District created by the York County Zoning Ordinance is part of a larger area recognized in the National Register of Historic Places. The district contains a variety of residential, commercial, civic, and institutional buildings, representing all periods of the village's history. Because these buildings vary in their sensitivity to change, guidelines have been developed for three categories of buildings:

- **Pivotal** – those dating from 1865 or earlier
- **Contributing** – those dating between 1865 and 1945
- **Non-contributing** – those constructed since 1945

The design guidelines recognize and delineate two distinct character areas within the Village (as described below and shown on the map on pages v and xxii):

- **The Historic Core** – contains the majority of Yorktown’s significant architectural resources. It includes areas of the Village within the original survey of 1691, as well as adjacent areas of topographic similarity (other parcels above the bluffs).
- **The Waterfront** – generally comprises the area below the crest of the bluffs that run along the south side of Water Street.

This document is organized into four main sections, as follows:

- **Goals and Objectives**– are general statements that express objectives and general guiding criteria about design issues in Yorktown. These are meant to be thought-provoking reminders of important considerations, in contrast to mandatory requirements or stipulations.
- **Specific Guidelines** – are those that indicate a particular treatment or characteristic that should be observed in the design and construction process. As a general rule, if designs are in accordance with these guidelines, they will be approvable by the HYDC. While these guidelines indicate a desired approach, they are not intended to be absolute requirements and, in that regard, the HYDC will have the ability to consider alternate proposals on a case-by-case basis.
- **Appendix 1 – Illustrations and Diagrams** – provide examples intended to show methods of complying with the specific design guidelines. The illustrations are not intended to represent the only approach that might be used or to limit the ability of a property owner or designer to propose alternatives for consideration.
- **Appendix 2 – Glossary** – provides definitions of specific words and terms used throughout the document.

Five Principles for Yorktown

Yorktown’s physical environment provides links to the past – to the formative years and events in the establishment of our nation. In the United States today, the opportunities for such glimpses into the past are rare indeed, rendering what Yorktown has to offer all the more valuable and deserving of special recognition and care. The many other things that Yorktown is today – seat of county government, attractive residential and business community, recreational and cultural destination – all depend in some way on the village’s historic past and its significance for us in the present. It stands to reason, then, that caring for Yorktown’s architectural resources is a sensible and necessary way to ensure that the entire community maintains its special character, both now and in the future.

Understanding the impact of construction-related activities on Yorktown and its resources demands careful thought. Design review of activities such as construction of a new building, repair and maintenance of a historic residence, or planning of public improvements must be based on principles that reflect the character of Yorktown to incorporate preservation principles into the planning process.

Although the range of potential construction-related activities in Yorktown is considerable, the principles underlying a protection strategy for the village's resources and unique character are few and straightforward in nature. The Five Principles provide a succinct statement of such preservation aims.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

Acknowledge and Respect Yorktown's Spirit of Place, both Physically and Symbolically
Take Proper Care of Yorktown's Existing Resources
Make Changes to Existing Resources with Restraint
Let What is Old be Dominant over the New
Follow Established Design Precedents

The Five Principles are general in nature. They have provided a foundation for development of the following more specific goals and objectives and, in turn, for the preparation of the detailed guidelines that address specific situations and design issues throughout the village.



Overall Village

Goal 1

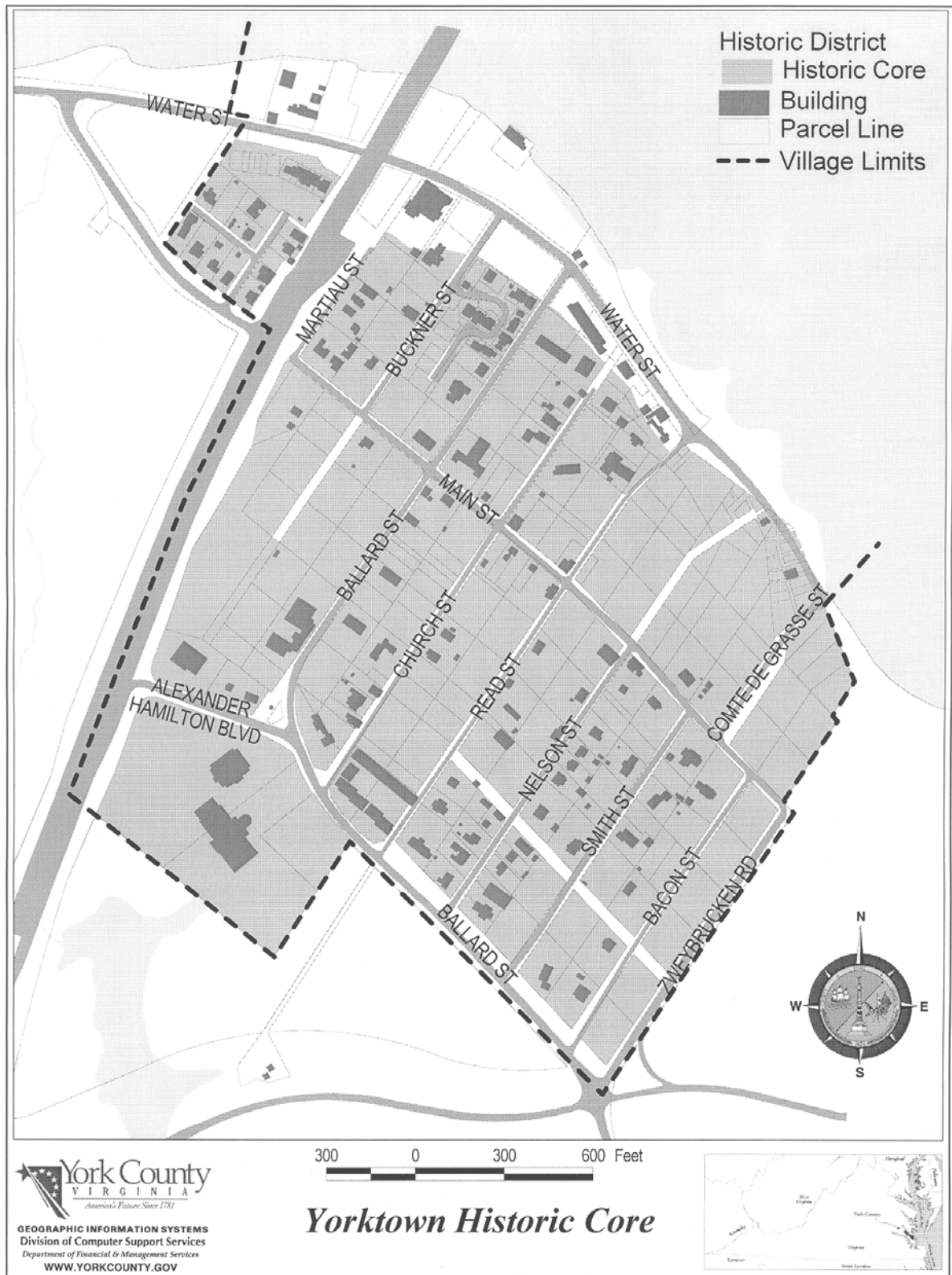
Protect Yorktown's village character and its historic, cultural, and natural resources.

- Implement guidelines for those resources, structures, features, or areas of the village that are most sensitive to change, as well as those that may provide appropriate opportunities for growth, change, and development.
- Define character areas of the village containing resources, , or areas of similar nature.
- Promote design guidelines that balance the preservation needs of specific resources or areas of the village with other community interests.

Goal 2

Promote better understanding, appreciation, and use of Yorktown's historic, cultural, and natural resources on the part of Village and County residents, property owners, merchants, County of York officials, National Park Service personnel, and visitors.

Ensure that design guidelines are clear, concise, and illustrative statements of design principles relevant to the character of Yorktown's architectural resources.



The Historic Core

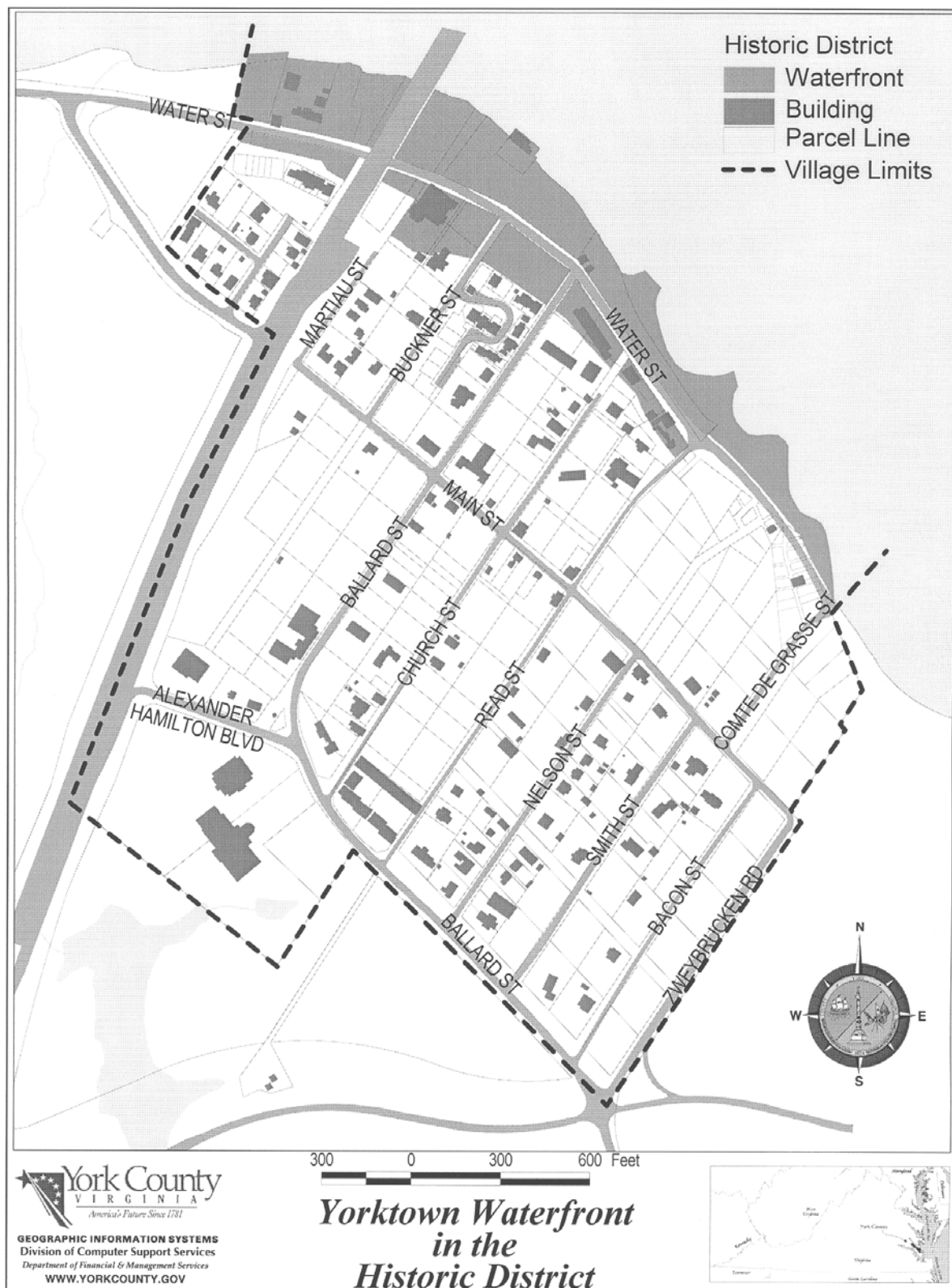
Encompasses the area bounded roughly on the northeast by the bluffs from Mathews Street to Read Street, and by Water Street from Read Street to the National Park Service Picnic Area; on the southeast by Tobacco Road; on the southwest by the Colonial Parkway; and, on the northwest by Yorktown Creek (see map on page xxiv).

Goal 1 Preserve and protect all **pivotal** resources (pre-1866); encourage the appropriate maintenance, repair, and supplemental design of all **contributing** resources (post-Civil War); encourage compatibility of **non-contributing** structures with pivotal and contributing resources.

- Prepare design guidelines, based in concept on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeology and Historic Preservation*, to promote the preservation of **pivotal** resources within the Historic Core. The guidelines should address the impacts of particular activities on the specific resource, adjacent resources, and the village as a whole.
- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, to promote the appropriate maintenance and appearance of **contributing** resources within the Historic Core. The guidelines should address the impacts of particular activities on the specific resource, adjacent resources, and the village as a whole.
- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, to compatibility among the Historic Core's architectural resources and its other features. The guidelines should address the impacts of particular activities on adjacent resources and the village as a whole.

Goal 2 Decrease the impact of new construction or site development and ensure that new construction is appropriate to the history and village character of Yorktown, as well as to the commercial, recreational, and cultural character of the waterfront.

- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, for acceptable occurrences and types of new construction (new or relocated freestanding structures) and site development (paving and other surface treatments, fencing and other enclosure systems, utilities, etc.) within the Historic Core.



The Waterfront

Encompasses the area bounded roughly on the northeast by the York River; on the southeast by Read Street; on the southwest by the bluffs; and on the west by Mathews Street (see map on page xxvi).

Goal 1 Promote the appropriate maintenance, repair, and supplemental design of all **contributing** resources, and encourage the compatibility of non-contributing structures and features, in accordance with the Waterfront's existing commercial, recreational, and historical character.

- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, to promote the appropriate maintenance and appearance of **contributing** resources within the Waterfront. The guidelines should address the impacts of particular activities on the specific resource, adjacent resources, and the village as a whole.
- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, to promote design compatibility among the Waterfront's architectural resources and its other features. The guidelines should address the impacts of particular activities on adjacent resources and the village as a whole.

Goal 2 Ensure that new construction is appropriate to the history and village character of Yorktown, as well as to the commercial, recreational, and cultural character of the waterfront.

- Prepare design guidelines, based on the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, to address typical new construction and site development concerns characteristic of the Waterfront.